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**DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE**

Intelligence Memorandum

Status of Guerrilla Forces in South Vietnam

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
December 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

STATUS OF GUERRILLA FORCES IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Introduction

1. The status of the Viet Cong Guerrilla forces has been one of the crucial factors bearing on Communist military effectiveness in South Vietnam. Since 1966 the capabilities and effectiveness of this village-oriented asset have been severely eroded. Nonetheless, Guerrillas still remain a significant factor in the war in several of the most critical areas of South Vietnam. This memorandum assesses the strength and status of Guerrilla forces and the factors that have shaped the changing status of these forces.

Summary

2. During the past five years, Guerrilla strength in South Vietnam has declined by some two-thirds - from about 170,000 in 1966 to about 40,000-60,000 in 1971. This decline, which has varied from area to area, is largely the result of the upgrading of Guerrillas into Main Forces units during the 1966-68 period, heavy combat losses and desertions, and a decline in recruitment - itself a reflection of the successes of the Allied pacification program in recent years. The heaviest attrition of Guerrilla strength during the 1966-69 period has been in the areas adjacent to Saigon and the coastal provinces. More recently, erosion in the Delta has been pronounced, reflecting significant control gains made there by the South Vietnamese government (GVN) in 1970-71.

3. The declining Guerrilla force has also been accompanied by changes in the scope and quality of Guerrilla activities. There is increasing evidence of weakened command structures among local Guerrilla units with a concomittant decline in the availability of competent, trained cadre. In some areas, war weariness is manifest in a disinclination to fight and a general desire on the part of Guerrillas to avoid risks. In effect, some Guerrillas have become little more than propagandists, tax collectors, and bodyguards for the local Viet Cong officials.

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4. These negative features notwithstanding, the Guerrillas still represent a significant element in the enemy's insurgent posture and a resource to draw upon for executing various political and military objectives, including limited offensive actions such as sniping. Furthermore, "secret" Guerrillas, a category within the Guerrilla force which is growing in relative importance, provide a clandestine nucleus for maintaining the intelligence network and for carrying out sabotage and terrorism.

DiscussionCharacteristics and Distribution of Guerrilla Forces

5. Guerrillas are, for the most part, members of small military units serving predominantly on a part-time basis in their home villages under the authority of the local People's Revolutionary (Communist) Party chapter. In Viet Cong strongholds the village Guerrilla organization, during the early years of the war, often consisted of a platoon designed to operate throughout the village area, a squad in each of the several hamlets of the village, and a few special-purpose cells for such tasks as armed propaganda, assassination, or demolition. Variations on this structure have been increasingly the rule, and in weak Viet Cong areas the structure exists in only rudimentary form.

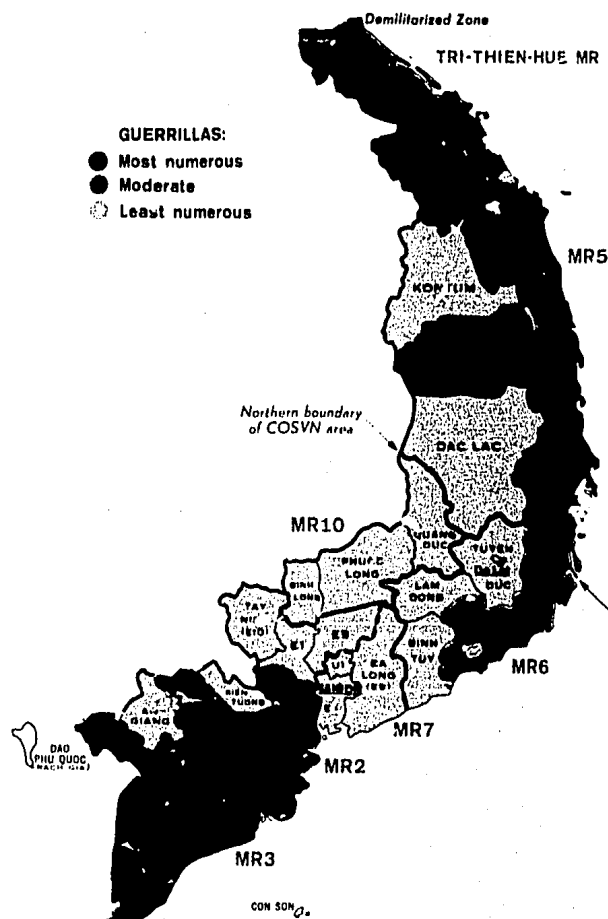
6. Where security conditions permit Guerrillas to operate actively, they perform a variety of police and military functions. They are the local muscle behind the Party, and they are responsible for hamlet and village defenses. They also support Main and Local Forces operating in their areas -- as scouts and guides. Guerrillas also engage in overt hostile harassment activities such as sniping and demolition. In areas where Guerrillas are not able to operate overtly there are covert or "secret" Guerrillas. As the GVN has increased its control over the rural population, the importance and, in some areas, the number of these secret Guerrillas has increased. Guerrilla units formerly were utilized as a manpower pool for the Main and Local Forces. The upgrading of Guerrillas, however, has virtually ceased because of the shortage of Guerrillas and the reduced population under Viet Cong control.

7. Historically, the size and quality of the Guerrilla forces have been molded by several influences, the most important being the degree of traditional Viet Cong or GVN influence, regional and ethnic differences, and the size of the population base. Guerrillas have been most numerous in two densely populated areas of South Vietnam -- the coastal strip south from Da Nang to Phu Yen Province, and in the Mekong Delta southwest of Saigon (see the map). The Guerrillas in the coastal strip have been among

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**Historical Distribution of Strength
of Vietcong Guerrilla Forces**



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the best in South Vietnam; the Viet Minh and later the Viet Cong have long been strong and well entrenched in this area. In most of the remaining central coastal provinces, the enemy has had greater Guerrilla strength in the highland areas than in the lowlands. This is a reflection of Viet Cong attention to highland tribes and their weakness relative to the GVN in the lowlands of these provinces.

8. In the Delta, the Guerrillas have been prone to temporize and desert, a trait common to the indigenous forces of both sides in that region. Guerrilla forces in the Delta have been weakest in An Giang and portions of Can Tho Provinces because of a hostile Hao Hoa populace.

9. The upper edge of the Delta, which encompasses Saigon, and the remote jungle areas north and west of Saigon have had the smallest Guerrilla forces in South Vietnam as a result of low population density and the hostility of Cao Dai and Catholic minorities. Some of the Guerrillas in the vicinity of Saigon - particularly areas of Hau Nghia and Long An Provinces - were among the best in South Vietnam, despite their small numbers, because of their location in pockets of traditional Viet Cong strength.

Trends in Guerrilla Strength

10. The number of Guerrillas is believed to have been about 170,000 during the first quarter of 1966. Since that time there has been a rather steady erosion in the strength of Guerrilla forces. Earlier analysis indicated that Guerrilla strength was about 110,000-135,000 by mid-1967 and 80,000-125,000 by the second quarter of 1968.⁽¹⁾

11. The 1967 and 1968 estimates were based on a limited number of statements on Guerrilla strength from documentary sources that were used in a correlation-regression analysis. A sufficient quantity of documentation became available in the second half of 1969 to produce a more detailed estimate, which placed Guerrilla strength toward the end of 1969 at some 60,000-80,000. Documentary data alone accounted for nearly 60,000 Guerrillas distributed by military region as shown in the following tabulation.⁽²⁾ After allowance was made for exaggeration of Guerrilla strengths in the documentation, provinces or portions of provinces not included in the documentary data were estimated to bring total Guerrilla strength up to 60,000-80,000.

2. Force levels by district and province within each military region are presented in the table at the end of the text.

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| <u>Military Region</u> | <u>Guerrilla Strength</u> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | 15,140 |
| 2 | 10,478 |
| 3 | 6,257 |
| 4 | 27,139 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>59,014</i> |

Erosion of Guerrilla Forces

12. Three factors largely account for the erosion of Guerrilla forces. First, the massive assignment during 1966-68 of Guerrillas to higher echelons as troop replacements; second, heavy combat losses and, since late 1968, desertion; and third, a falloff in recruitment, which reached drastic proportions as early as the fall of 1968 as Allied pacification efforts increasingly denied the enemy access to the population. Their waning recruiting capability caused the Viet Cong to restrict sharply since 1969 the assignment of Guerrilla forces to higher echelons. In fact, in some instances, higher echelon troops, including North Vietnamese, have been reassigned to Guerrilla units to bolster their strength.

13. The extent of the decline in force strength since 1966 has ranged from a high of 95% in some areas to less than 50% in others. For example, by late 1970 the decline in Quang Ngai Province amounted to at least 75%, in Binh Dinh to 75% or more, in Subregion Long An to 80% or more, and in Vinh Long in the Delta to more than 95%. The Quang Da Special Zone, however, showed the most resiliency, retaining at least 50% of its 1969 Guerrilla strength. During 1966-69 the greatest attrition took place in areas adjacent to Saigon and in the coastal strip provinces, where heavy fighting was sustained. The erosion of Guerrilla forces in the Delta during 1970-71 has been the result of sharp gains in population control made by the GVN.

14. Although documentation on the current strength of Guerrilla forces is not as complete as for 1969, it is clear that the erosion of these forces has continued during the past two years. On the basis of available evidence and judgments about the probable effects of GVN pacification efforts, it is believed that the total number of Guerrillas probably declined by about one-third to about 40,000-60,000 in the fourth quarter of 1971.

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This estimate represents the number of Guerrillas that would be reported by Viet Cong province authorities and as such contains an upward bias, as the number of Guerrillas providing some degree of threat is almost certainly smaller than the number carried on Viet Cong rolls. Furthermore, the estimate includes 10,000 secret Guerrillas.

15. The drain of manpower from the Guerrilla forces has been accompanied by a change in the type and functions of many of the remaining forces. This has been particularly pronounced in the critical coastal provinces - Quang Da, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh. In the coastal provinces, for example, about 60% of all Guerrillas were situated in the highlands by the end of 1970, compared with less than 30% in 1966. This shift has been reflected in enemy initiatives and aggressiveness - highland Guerrillas operate mainly in a defensive reaction mode and avoid the lowland areas.

Quality and Morale Problems

16. As a consequence of the attrition of Guerrilla forces as well as the successes of the Allied pacification efforts, classic, overt Guerrilla resistance in the villages has nearly collapsed. Once, the entrance of Allied patrols into a Viet Cong village area meant the near certainty of sniper fire. Now, this may not occur even in the strongest Viet Cong villages. Typically, physical preparations for Guerrilla resistance in Viet Cong villages are much diminished if they exist at all.

17. Since the issuance of Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) Resolution 9 in mid-1969, Guerrillas have been under orders to practice economy-of-force tactics. However, in many instances the Guerrillas are known to be even less active than enemy policy dictates. In the crucial coastal provinces - Quang Da, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh - this phenomenon appears to be related to war weariness and to the Guerrillas' own awareness that the war is phasing down. Information on this greater disinclination to fight - ranging from situation reports on individual villages to regional echelon documents - strongly suggests official acquiescence in, if not sanction of, the practice. Elsewhere in South Vietnam, Guerrillas have also tended to avoid serious risks. In Go Cong and Vinh Long Provinces in the Delta, for example, the Guerrillas have done little more than act as bodyguards, tax collectors, and propagandists since 1970. In fact, the Guerrillas in Vinh Long are known to be acting according to at least province-echelon orders to lie low.

18. The Viet Cong increasingly have relied on women and teenagers, particularly in northern South Vietnam. Since mid-1969, Guerrilla recruiting directives have uniformly ordered the recruitment of a greater proportion of women and teenagers rather than men, particularly as secret Guerrillas.

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Women, for example, theoretically are supposed to comprise as much as 40% of all Guerrillas in northern South Vietnam now. Teenagers are supposed to have a substantially lesser but significant role. In Binh Dinh Province, for example, some 30% of the Guerrilla forces in the spring of 1969 consisted of teenagers as opposed to 10% in early 1968.

19. There has also been a decline in the quality of Guerrilla cadre in recent years, particularly at the village and hamlet levels, where the Viet Cong have experienced high rates of cadre turnover and attrition, including Party members.

20. In response to these problems, Main and Local Force cadres have been downgraded in a number of areas to village Guerrilla cadre, particularly since 1969. Evidence indicates that these moves were made because the villages were unable to provide needed cadre. Moreover, some of the downgraded cadre were North Vietnamese. Such a move underscores the severity of the problem. Communist doctrine clearly calls for all Guerrillas to be natives of the villages in which they serve.

Increased Importance of Secret Guerrillas

21. Secret Guerrillas have always existed within the Guerrilla force structure for purposes of maintaining an intelligence network, for carrying out limited offensive activity such as sabotage and terrorism, and for providing a potential military organization in GVN-controlled territory. From 1965 through early 1969, Guerrillas were primarily a military force seeking to resist Allied entrance into Viet Cong villages, to harass lines of communication, and to assist higher echelon troops within defined areas of responsibility. Secret Guerrillas played a low-key, relatively secondary role. In areas dominated by the Viet Cong, they functioned as in-place assets, surfacing only when Allied forces had established a permanent presence.

22. The number of secret Guerrillas had always been relatively small, never comprising more than about 15% of total Guerrilla strength in the 1966-69 period. With the shift to protracted war strategy in 1969, an attempt was made to increase the number of secret Guerrillas. Viet Cong directives set high recruitment goals. For example, a June 1970 directive of the Binh Dinh Province Party Committee called for increasing the number of secret Guerrillas until they comprise 25% of all Guerrillas. An April 1970 directive from the Current Affairs Committee of the Quang Da Special Zone to one district within the zone, stated that "40% of the new recruits were to be overt Guerrillas and 60% were to be covert Guerrillas." This order came after a February 1970 letter from the Chief of the Military Staff Department, Viet Cong Military Region 5, to his counterpart in Quang Da, directing that "secret Guerrillas in liberated lowland villages and the fringes

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of cities and weak areas in the countryside were to be developed to four or five times their present strength." Among all Guerrillas in Quang Da, "40% were to be overt Guerrillas and 60% secret Guerrillas."

23. It is clear that the policy of increasing the relative number of secret Guerrillas reflects Viet Cong acceptance of widespread increases in GVN control of the population. Guerrillas in firmly controlled GVN areas must be clandestine. Conversion to secret Guerrilla status has been used by the Viet Cong leaders in some areas in an attempt to find some useful role for Guerrillas in areas undergoing successful pacification. In some instances, Guerrillas have been offered the choice of leaving their homes to serve with higher level forces or going covert, often via the false defector route.

24. Despite organizational efforts, progress in recruiting secret Guerrillas has been sluggish in the greater part of South Vietnam. These recruiting efforts have not been able to prevent an overall decline in secret Guerrilla strength since 1966. We estimate that the number of secret Guerrillas throughout South Vietnam may approximate 10,000. Of such a total, some 4,000 are in MR 1, 3,000 in MR 2, and 1,500 each in MR 3 and MR 4.

25. Despite the overall decline in secret Guerrilla strength, the Viet Cong have recently been able to increase their number in limited areas. In Binh Dinh Province, for example, although total Guerrilla strength declined approximately 34% between April 1969 and December 1970 (from 7,300 to 4,800), the number of secret Guerrillas increased substantially from 900 to about 2,000, so that they comprised more than 40% of total Guerrilla strength in the province. A review of information on Subregion 1, northwest of Saigon shows that late in 1968 total Guerrilla strength approximated 2,000, of which 300 were secret Guerrillas. By the end of 1970, overall Guerrilla strength had fallen to 1,500, with secret Guerrillas comprising 40% of the total, or about 600. Within the Subregion, sharp increases have been noted in the Cu Chi and Go Mon districts, where secret Guerrillas comprise 65% and 25%, respectively, of total Guerrillas. In the Quang Da Special Zone (in GVN MR 1) where the buildup of secret Guerrillas began the earliest and has remained the strongest, Guerrilla ranks were eroded by late 1970 to somewhat more than 8,000; the size of the secret Guerrilla force increased from about 1,000 late in 1968 to about 3,000.

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CONFIDENTIAL**Documented Guerrilla Strength in 1969 a/**

| | <u>Strength Fixes</u> | <u>Date of Information (1969)</u> |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Military Region 1 | <u>15,140*</u> | |
| Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region | 2,380* | June |
| Quang Da Special Zone | | |
| Districts | | |
| Dien Ban, Day Xuyen, Dai Loc, Hoi An | 5,664* | December |
| Hoa Vang | 740* | November |
| Hoa Vang | 642 | November |
| Dai Loc | 176 | September |
| Dai Loc | 389 | December |
| Day Xuyen | 200 | September |
| Quang Nam Province | 4,098 | January |
| Districts | | |
| Que Son | 912* | August-November |
| Que Son | 1,256 | Second Half of Year |
| Thang Binh | 921* | August-November |
| Thien Phuoc | 526* | August-November |
| N. Tam Ky | 438 | June |
| N. Tam Ky | 353* | August-November |
| S. Tam Ky | 163* | August-November |
| Tien Phuoc | 729 | June |
| Tien Phuoc | 511 | August |
| Tien Phuoc | 776* | Second Half of Year |
| Thang Binh | 1,498 | Second Half of Year |
| Quang Ngai Province | 10,884 | April |
| Districts | | |
| Duc Pho | 1,457 | April |
| Duc Pho | 1,954* | October |
| Ba To | 1,135 | April |
| Ba To | 751* | December |
| Military Region 2 | <u>10,478*</u> | |
| Binh Dinh Province | 7,362* | April |
| Districts | | |
| Phu My | 1,446 | April |
| Phu My | 1,173 | December |
| Hoai Nhon | 1,192 | April |
| Hoai Nhon | 572 | September |
| Vinh Thanh, An Lao | 859 | June |
| Dac Lac Province | | |
| Districts | | |
| N2 | 70* | October |
| Le Trung | 219* | August |

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CONFIDENTIAL**Documented Guerrilla Strength in 1969 a/
(Continued)**

| | <u>Strength Fixes</u> | <u>Date of Information (1969)</u> |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Military Region 2 (Continued) | | |
| Gia Lai Province | | |
| Unlocated Villages | 362* | June |
| Phu Yen Province | 1,146* | May |
| Khanh Hoa Province | 1,319* | June |
| Military Region 3 | <u>6,257*</u> | |
| Subregion 1 | 1,500* | December |
| Districts | | |
| Cu Chi | 225 | June |
| Trang Bang | 423 | September |
| Go Mon | 171 | June |
| Subregion 2 b/ | 800* | November |
| Districts | | |
| Duc Hoa | 696 | February |
| Duc Hoa | 557 | May |
| Subregion 3 b/ | 500* | November |
| Subregion 4 | 400* | November |
| Subregion 5 | 600* | November |
| Subregion 6 (Saigon and environs) | 500* | November |
| Military Region 7 | 600* | November |
| Districts | | |
| Long Thanh and Binh Son | 139 | December |
| Tay Ninh Province | 600* | November |
| District | | |
| DMC | 68 | December |
| Phuoc Long Province | | |
| District | | |
| K29 | 757* | September |
| Military Region 4 | <u>27,139*</u> | |
| My Tho Province | 2,335* | May |
| Kien Phong Province | 950* | May |
| Ben Tre Province | 6,533* | May |
| Ben Tre Province | 4,544 | July |
| An Giang Province | 359* | May |
| Kien Tuong Province | 175* | May |

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Documented Guerrilla Strength in 1969 a/
(Continued)

| | <u>Strength Fixes</u> | <u>Date of Information</u> (1969) |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Military Region 4 (Continued) | | |
| Go Cong Province | 250* | May |
| Tra Vinh Province | 5,102* | October |
| Cau Mau Province | 4,744* | October |
| District | | |
| Dam Doi | 1,675 | July |
| Soc Trang Province | 2,712 | August |
| Soc Trang Province | 2,670* | October |
| Can Tho Province | 2,153 | October |
| Can Tho Province | 1,518* | December |
| Rach Gia Province | 1,927 | September |
| Rach Gia Province | 2,503* | October |
| Total | 59,014 | |

a. Only those fixes marked with an asterisk have been used to derive totals. Generally, the fixes for districts are from different sources than those for regions, zones, and provinces and are included only to help validate the level of the overall figure for the provinces. In cases where a fix was available only for a district or, in some instances, when it was for a different time of the year, it was included only in the total for the region.

b. In mid-1970, Subregions 2 and 3 were consolidated, along with an adjoining part of Cambodia, into Subregion Long An.

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